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29 November 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
VIA: Deputy Director of Central Intelligence  
Deputy Director for Intelligence  
FROM: Douglas J. MacEachin  
Director of Soviet Analysis  
SUBJECT: Escalation of Soviet Involvement in  
Military Support of Nicaragua: Why Now?

1. The Soviets may not have anticipated that the US would accuse them of attempting to deliver Mig-21's to the Sandinistas, but we believe they must have considered it likely that the US would view the first direct shipment of combat equipment to Nicaragua on a Soviet ship to be an escalation of Moscow's involvement in support of the Managua regime. Previously the Soviets had been careful to avoid direct involvement in military deliveries to Nicaragua. Earlier shipments of Soviet military equipment were carried in either Algerian or Bulgarian ships. Many Soviet merchant ships have called at Nicaraguan ports, but their cargos have all been dual-use items (such as trucks and MI-8 transport helicopters) ostensibly consigned by Soviet civilian export organizations.

2. The decision to use a Soviet ship was a clear change from Moscow's previous policy of avoiding direct arms shipments on Soviet vessels. Such a departure from past policy would have required a conscious decision at the highest level. The Soviets would have had to consider the possibility that their more open and direct involvement in arms shipments could result in the restoration of US aid to the Contras and greater direct US military assistance throughout the region. Of at least equal importance, Moscow would have had to weigh the potential impact of its move on US-Soviet relations and particularly on the prospects for resuming the arms control dialogue.

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Nicaragua: Why Now?

3. Lacking direct evidence, we can only speculate as to Soviet motivations for undertaking such a move at this time.

- Military Considerations. The Sandanistas had been pressing Moscow for more sophisticated weapons, and during his summer visit to the USSR, Ortega may have argued that such equipment would enable him to defeat the insurgency. Castro too, may have been pressing Moscow on this score. The Soviets probably promised Ortega that they would provide more advanced equipment, including the MI-24 helicopter gun ships which were delivered by the Bakuriani.
- The Contadora Treaty Talks. Managua has approved a draft Contadora treaty which would ban the introduction of "advanced weapons," and Moscow has expressed support for the Contadora effort. Although the treaty has an uncertain future, both the Sandinistas and the Soviets may be trying to accelerate the delivery of weapons--such as MI-24's and possibly even air defense missiles--that might be affected by it.
- Probing the US "Line". Moscow, which heretofore has shown that it recognizes US sensitivity about Soviet relations with Nicaragua, may have sought to establish the principle that, so long as it respects in a literal sense the US ban on MiG fighters, provision of other major weapons systems is legitimate. Support for the view that the Soviets meant to probe the US definition of "not acceptable" is suggested by the fact that Czechoslovak Prime Minister Strougal--presumably at Moscow's prompting--stated publicly (after the Western news stories about possible MiG-21 deliveries had appeared) that Czechoslovakia "is delivering" L-39 "training" aircraft. (See attached 16 November memo on this subject).

4. We think all of these factors contributed to the Soviet decision, but all three could have been satisfied without using a Soviet vessel. Just one week earlier, in fact, about 7 MI-24's had been delivered to the east coast port of El Bluff in a Bulgarian freighter.

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5. Consequently, we believe the decision to use a Soviet vessel and the timing of the shipment probably was driven in the final analysis by a desire to send a political signal. The decision probably was made sometime between Ortega's visit in June and mid-September, in the same time period when the Soviet leadership was deliberating on such matters as the Gromyko visit to Washington, the future course in arms control, and US-Soviet relations in general. It is likely that some in the leadership wanted to make clear that efforts to revive the arms control dialogue and to improve US-Soviet trade would not inhibit the USSR's freedom of action on other fronts; in effect, to reaffirm Moscow's "no linkage" policy of the 1970's. A demonstration of resolve in this regard may also have been needed to reassure Soviet leaders who might question the wisdom of opening up arms control discussion again.

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Douglas J. MacEachin

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16 November 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director for Intelligence

FROM: Douglas J. MacEachin  
Director of Soviet Analysis

SUBJECT: The L-39 Issue: Possible Soviet Motivations

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1. Czech Premier Strougal stated in Mexico City at an 8 November news conference that Czechoslovakia is delivering L-39 aircraft to Nicaragua. Strougal's statement was carried in the official Czech party daily, Rude Pravo, on 10 November. Rude Pravo reported that, in response to a question by an unidentified journalist, Strougal "rejected as misinformation the US government's claim that the CSSR is delivering combat (sic) aircraft to Nicaragua." The paper then quotes Strougal directly as stating, "We are merely delivering training (sic) aircraft--the L-39 --there."

2. It is highly unlikely that Strougal would have volunteered this statement without clearing it with the Soviets first. Neither the Soviets nor their allies are accustomed to volunteering information on their arms deliveries to the third world. Even if Strougal felt it necessary to respond in some fashion to the question put to him he could have generalized about Czech delivery of "defensive equipment" to Nicaragua or simply denied any such shipments at all. His specific reference to L-39 shipments is thus striking and unusual both because of its specificity and because it gratuitously signals Czech intentions to proceed with the delivery of jet aircraft to Nicaragua (albeit "trainers") in the midst of a US-Soviet dispute over this issue. If his reference was inadvertent, then Rude Pravo would almost certainly not have replayed it.

3. The circumstantial evidence thus suggests that the Soviets prompted Strougal to specifically mention the delivery of L-39s to Nicaragua.

4. If the Soviets did prompt Strougal to raise the L-39 issue, it is still possible that the Soviet are simply exploiting publicized US concern over the issue of arms deliveries to Nicaragua to further polarize political opinion in the US over the Administration's Central American policy. Given the limited utility of such a gesture, however, its seems more likely that the Strougal announcement is a reflection of more pragmatic considerations in



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Moscow related directly to the issue of jet aircraft deliveries to Nicaragua. Several possibilities exist.

- The Soviets have already delivered L-39s to Nicaragua and the Strougal announcement is intended to lay the groundwork for regional acceptance of this fact, and to justify it as not transgressing the stipulated US limits on delivery of MiG-21s. Over the longer term, the Soviets may anticipate that even more advanced aircraft or weaponry could be shipped to Nicaragua once the precedent is established of limited weapons deliveries, not only including L-39s but possibly MiG variants less capable than the MiG-21.
- The Soviet have tentatively decided to ship L-39s to Nicaragua but actual shipment has not yet occurred. Conceivably, therefore, the US reaction to the Strougal statement could influence Moscow's decision to proceed with actual shipments.
- The decision to send L-39s to Nicaragua is still under consideration in Moscow and the Strougal announcement is intended to test the limits of US resolve on the jet fighter issue; in effect taking advantage of US statements that the delivery of MiG-21s is the fault line of US tolerance, and thus seeking to establish Moscow's (or its surrogates') right to deliver to the Sandinistas jet aircraft that fall below the threshold stipulated by Washington itself.

5. If Moscow is in fact testing the limits of US resolve, Kremlin leaders may calculate that direct US military action against Nicaragua can be avoided by seeking to appeal to regional sentiments against US military intervention and perhaps by supplementing this effort with diplomatic overtures to Washington raising the possibility of resumed arms talks. Such a tactic by Moscow could be motivated by the perception professed by some Soviet spokesmen of significant divisions within the US administration over arms control and relations with Moscow, and of similar divisions between the Administration and congressional opponents of its Central American policy. Although unlikely, the Soviets may view their Nicaragua gambit as an attempt to exacerbate these divisions -- possibly leading to greater constraints on the Administration's latitude to continue to pursue assertive policies either in Central American or toward Moscow--while forcing US acceptance of Moscow's "legitimate" assistance to the Managua regime. Under this scenario, even if the US resorts to punitive military action against Nicaragua, the Kremlin

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might calculate that its tactic of having declared in advance that it did not intend to challenge US prohibitions will have created the atmosphere for political backlash both at home and from abroad that would undermine the political basis of the administration's policies in Central America.

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